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FOR NEA/FO, NEA/IPA AND NEA/MAG (WILLIAMS, PATTERSON, HAYES)

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SUBJECT: SITUATION IN GAZA: AMBASSADOR DELIVERS ARAB LEAGUE
DEMARCHE; TUNISIANS PROTEST ISRAELI ACTIONS

REF: STATE 134964

Classified By: Ambassador Robert F. Godec for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

Summary

¶1. (C) Ambassador delivered reftel Arab League demarche in a December 30 meeting with MFA Chief of Staff Mahmoud Khemiri. In doing so, he acknowledged the MFA statement of December 27, underscoring, however, that Hamas is responsible for the current situation. Meanwhile, Gaza has dominated local media coverage, which has become increasingly sensational. Many media outlets have referred to Israeli military actions as a "massacre" and one tabloid has invoked the term "genocide," a description that Ambassador told Khemiri was wrong and unhelpful. Uncharacteristically, the GOT has allowed some demonstrations to proceed, including a gathering of several hundred lawyers outside the Tunis courthouse at midday Tuesday. Police broke up another demonstration, this one organized by the opposition Progressive Democratic Party. Prominent civil society organizations have also issued statements condemning the Israeli "massacre" and "war crimes" against the Palestinian people. Some young Tunisians have posted pictures of the Palestinian flag and slogans like "Free Gaza" on their Facebook profiles. End Summary.

Arab League Demarche Delivered;
FM Abdallah to Represent Tunisia

¶2. (C) The Ambassador met on December 30 with Mahmoud Khemiri, MFA Chief of Staff, to review reftel points in advance of the Arab League Ministerial on the violence in Gaza. The Ambassador emphasized that it would be critical to avoid inflammatory, one-sided statements. To illustrate the point, the Ambassador pointed out that the use of the term "genocide," which has now appeared in some local print media, to describe the situation, is wrong and not helpful.

¶3. (C) Khemiri confirmed that Foreign Minister Abdallah would represent Tunisia at the Cairo meeting. Referencing the points made in the December 30 White House press briefing, Khemiri made clear that the GOT agreed that a "durable" ceasefire is urgently needed. In the meantime, he said, it is the Palestinian people who are suffering. After the Ambassador took note of the GOT statement on the situation (see para 4), Khemiri asked whether the United States had found the statement balanced. In response, the Ambassador said that it should also be underscored that Hamas is responsible for the current situation.

Tunisian Statement Condemns Violence;
Ben Ali Consults with al-Qadhafi

¶4. (U) Following is the text of the December 27 statement issued by the MFA and carried in local media:

Begin text:

Tunisia voices deep concern about the Israeli air raids against the Gaza Strip, which caused the death of tens of victims among the Palestinian brotherly people. Tunisia condemns this dangerous escalation and reiterates its repudiation of all forms of violence. It reasserts its call upon the international community, notably influential powers, to urgently and energetically step in to stop the Israeli aggression, provide the necessary protection to the Palestinian people and put an end to their sufferings.

Tunisia also underlines that these acts are likely to fuel tension, worsen the situation, and endanger all efforts meant to establish peace, security and stability in the region.

End Text.

¶5. (SBU) Local media also reported that President Ben Ali spoke with Libyan Leader al-Qadhafi on December 27 to discuss the situation in Gaza. According to press reports, the two leaders agreed on "the need for an urgent action to put an immediate halt to this dangerous escalation, which threatens security and peace in the Middle East region."

Sensational Media Coverage

¶6. (SBU) The Israeli air attacks in Gaza have dominated the Tunisian media over the last few days to a degree not seen since the Israeli operations in Lebanon of summer 2006. While following the usual range of vehemence dictated by each paper's editorial policy, condemnation of the Israeli actions and international, and especially American, indifference has been unanimous. US "justification" of the Israeli actions and call for Hamas to respect the truce, even when not directly criticized, stands in sharp contrast against other reporting detailing the suffering in Gaza. Harsh headlines speak of "massacre" and "hell" in Gaza and disturbing photos show bloody corpses, including parents grieving over their slain children. Arabic-language papers have used terms like "extermination" and "cremation," which in Arabic bring to mind images of Nazi atrocities during WWII, while one French-language paper has gone so far as to term the Israeli campaign "genocide."

Civil Society Takes to the Streets

¶7. (C) Uncharacteristically, the Tunisian authorities have allowed some demonstrations expressing solidarity with the Palestinian people to go forward. According to one participant, some 700 Tunisian lawyers gathered for two hours this morning in front of the Palace of Justice, which houses the Tunisian Court of First Instance. (Note: A vendor whose shop is nearby told PolOff that there were between 100-200 people.) The demonstration was not planned in advance, according to Mokhtar Trifi, head of the Tunisian Human Rights League, who was present, so protesters were not carrying signs or placards. According to Trifi, several protesters waved Palestinian flags, and were said to be chanting the "usual" phrases in solidarity with the Palestinian people. He said police had closed off the street in front of the Palace of Justice, and made no effort to impede the demonstration. Trifi expressed frustration with the US position, which he said "no one accepts or is satisfied with." He called for the United States to take a more "balanced" position, rather than simply echoing Israeli talking points about security. "How can you justify the deaths of 350 people?" he asked rhetorically.

¶8. (SBU) Meanwhile, the opposition Progressive Democratic Party (PDP) held a short-lived demonstration in downtown Tunis today. According to Rachid Khachana, editor-in-chief of the PDP's weekly newspaper, "hundreds" of people showed up for the march, which had been called for 1 PM outside the Municipal Theater in downtown Tunis. Police broke up the

demonstration, reportedly injuring one protester in the process. Some protesters subsequently made their way to the PDP headquarters, not far away. They reportedly stood outside chanting slogans for a short period of time, but entered the PDP offices when police approached. PolOff visited the downtown area in the late afternoon and reported seeing an increased police presence, including several police vans in the vicinity of the Municipal Theater, but no further sign of protesters.

¶9. (SBU) There are also indications of other protests: Tunisia's main labor federation on December 29 announced a week of solidarity with the people of Gaza. Among the activities it has planned is a January 1 demonstration in downtown Tunis. PolOff observed that the labor union's headquarters has already been prepared for the occasion -- Palestinian and Iraqi flags are draped from the building, and numerous photographs of unidentified scenes of violence posted. A banner across the front of the building reads: "We are in support of the People of Gaza." Several other small demonstrations are said to have taken place in the last couple of days, including in the cities of Sfax, Kasserine, and Kairouan.

¶10. (SBU) Many civil society groups have also spoken out. The Tunisian League of Human Rights statement of December 27 condemned the Israeli "massacre" and "heinous crimes against the Palestinian people in Gaza... in complete defiance of all international norms and laws." The NGO Freedom and Equity issued a statement the same day characterizing Israeli actions as "war crimes." Other opposition parties have issued statements condemning the escalation of violence in similarly strong terms. Some young Tunisians are also now using Facebook to demonstrate solidarity with the people of Gaza, featuring pictures of the Palestinian flag and slogans like "Free Gaza" on their profiles.

Comment

¶11. (C) The Tunisian people are proud of their long history supporting the Palestinian cause and still very much identify with the Palestinians. Thus, we can expect that the sensational news coverage and the attempts by civil society to demonstrate solidarity with the people of Gaza will continue. As long as these demonstrations remain focused on the situation in Gaza, the government will likely allow the people on the "street" to let off some steam, just as it did during the 2006 war in Lebanon. While there is clearly frustration with the US Government, which is perceived as accepting without question the Israeli narrative, there have thus far been no signs that the demonstrations here have an anti-American bent. End Comment.

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<http://www.state.sgov.gov/p/nea/tunis/index.cfm>

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